

# VITAL RECORDS

by Ren Ebel



Ren Ebel, *Love*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

“It’s something any woman might say about her husband,” Laida tells me at breakfast. “Any woman might get mad and say he’s totally checked out, distant, in outer space. But in this case there’s something actually wrong, physically wrong, with his brain.”

## I

I let the connotations of this wash over me as our daughter Hanah begins throwing eggs and avocado to the floor. The dying man’s wife, Elena, is a recent friend of Laida’s and a writer for a well-known fashion magazine. I’ve only met her husband once before, during a barbecue at our home, which turned out to be only a week before he was diagnosed with the rare and aggressive form of cancer that’s filling his brain with fluid. He was dressed all in black with groomed gray hair, in his late fifties maybe. As I flipped burgers he held me captive with a long tirade concerning all that is wrong with Los Angeles. The underlying problem, he told me, was architecture, and he wasn’t just saying that because he was an architect. I helped him back his SUV down our long driveway and he ended up badly smashing his driver’s-side rearview mirror against our neighbor’s aluminum carport. I asked him if his car was okay and he said nothing. He just got out and stood there, looking down at the mirror and scratching his head for a long time. I walked back to the house.

I remember telling Laida that night that I thought he was kind of a drag. She reminded me that he’s French.

Laida and I visit Elena to help out while her husband is in the hospital. They live in a small two-bedroom home

in Silver Lake, a block away from the reservoir. They have a daughter, Ruby, who is the same age as Hanah, and the two of them get along. Elena answers the door. She’s warm, greeting us as if her world were not falling to pieces. She wanders around her house, searching for something. Ruby is on the floor. She points to Hanah and says “baby.” Elena tells us that her aunt and uncle are visiting from Chicago and that they’ll be around a little later after she’s left.



She warns us that they’re real characters, “like something out of *Seinfeld*,” which turns out to be an understatement. Then she tells us that the neurosurgeons are giving up. His brain is flooded and it won’t drain. He’s slipping in and out of comas. He’s dying, and he’s dying of the same thing that killed his own father when he was around the same age. “I don’t know why I’m so calm,” she says. “I’ve been hysterical all morning.”

After Elena leaves for the hospital, we take Hanah and Ruby to the park by the reservoir. I get something like a rush of adrenaline walking beside Laida, each of us pushing a stroller with a beautiful baby inside of it, two beautiful babies reaching across the space between their strollers to hold hands. But to admit this feeling out loud, now, would be to inaugurate and welcome some annihilation yet unknown, so I say nothing.

## II

Laida is in Colorado for the Stan Brakhage Symposium, so I've elected this weekend to drive Hanah down to visit my mother and grandmother in San Diego. Until last year my grandmother had been a resident of The Bridge, a senior center near my uncle's home in Alamosa, Colorado, but ongoing disputes between my mother and her siblings, including the exchange of a few very heated emails, led my mother to impulsively fly to Colorado while my uncle was vacationing in Mexico, break my grandmother's contract with The Bridge, and relocate her to Vista Gardens Memory Care near her own home in San Diego.

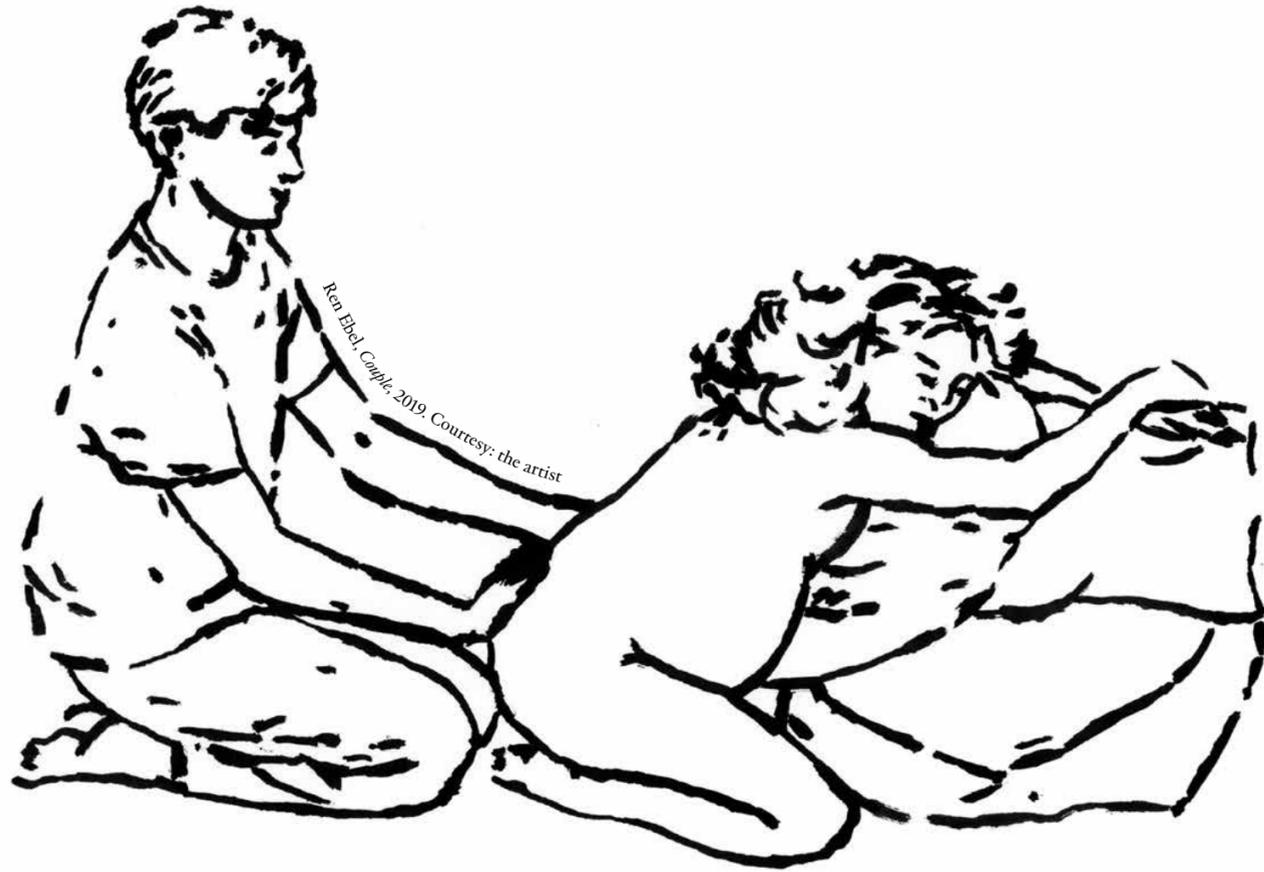
When I arrive, a teenager named Celine at the front desk tells me that my grandmother is waiting in the library down the hall. An ancient resident sits alone in the lobby puzzling over a half-played Scrabble board. Through the windows of a pair of double doors, I can see my mother sitting with my grandmother at a round oak table.

The Ronald Reagan Library at Vista Gardens Memory Care is a small rectangular room with a single bookshelf containing large-print editions of Tom Clancy and Patricia Cornwell novels, a few Reagan biographies, and a small

selection of Official Scrabble Players Dictionaries at one end. Any free wall space is covered by a framed portrait of Ronald or Ronald and Nancy. A woman with stringy gray hair, too young to be a resident herself, sits at one of the three old Dell computers near the door, headphones on, flipping quickly through airline webpages, seemingly in a state of panic. It's unlikely that this room has any material relationship to the Reagan estate, but is rather named in a way similar to how a theme park might name a section of its parking lot after a familiar cartoon character to make it easier to find your car at the end of the day.

"Where are we?" my grandmother asks. My mother explains loudly that her grandson and great-granddaughter have come to visit her, and that we are in the library. I put Hanah down by a plastic bucket full of green foam pool noodles, which are used in a variety of "chair sports" where residents sit in a circle of chairs, whacking a large balloon around. Hanah makes quick work of the noodles, pulling them out onto the floor and shrieking with delight. The woman at the computer does not look up. When my grandmother sees the baby, she becomes emotional, though she does not yet seem to understand who any of us are. She tells me she doesn't remember any of her own children being this cute when they were young. She repeats this again several times to my mother. She asks me how old my daughter is, and when I answer "one," she is surprised and says that she looks like she's ten. She asks me who the mother is, and when I show her a photo of Laida on my phone she says, "Now there's a beautiful woman." She begins to tell me that Bernie, her onetime Jewish boyfriend who died in 2015, left her a quarter of a million dollars. "It's just sitting there in the bank." She offers me "most of it," before my mother interjects, explaining to her in vain

that this is not in fact the case, and that much of this money has already been spent on her various medical expenses and tuition at Vista Gardens Memory Care.



My grandmother cycles through four or five talking points, repeating them again with minor variations, like a song's verse, bridge, chorus, and verse. Time has closed a tight loop on her mind, and sharing that space with her and my mother and daughter triggers inside me the sudden queasy vertigo of heredity, sanctified by my grandmother's spoken worries of memory and money, like prayers around a tiny rosary, before it all subsides gently into the drug-like void of family time. The all-permeating thing. This is what makes our visit, despite all the pain and cruelty between

my mother and her mother, and my mother and me, still a "nice" one. Undoubtedly it is, and will forever have been, a "nice visit."

The cycle is broken by the appearance of a sharply dressed orderly offering us a tray of watermelon slices and oatmeal cookies, which my grandmother, suddenly lucid, rejects harshly. I help myself to two of each. We say our goodbyes and when I return to my car, I find an anonymous handwritten note on my windshield that says: "Next time please be more considerate."

### III

In a dream, I watch a movie starring Matthew McConaughey as a scruffy loner wandering around Griffith Park with a metal detector, apparently searching for something significant buried in the ground. The movie is more than five hours long and is shot from a distance using a very long lens. There is no dialogue, only endless searching. The movie is called *Trails of My Wounded Memory*.

I wake up to the news that Elena's husband has died. There will be a memorial service over the weekend, but we'll be out of town.

I have an appointment with the acupuncturist Laida and I have been seeing in order to eradicate the mysterious bacteria we've been passing back and forth to one another during sex. My car is in the shop, so I take a Lyft to the acupuncturist's home office in Echo Park. She sticks a dozen needles in me and leaves me alone in a room with Chopin nocturnes playing from a distorted Bluetooth speaker near my head. My left arm begins to feel like it's turning to stone, with icy pain emanating from the benign tumor near

my elbow. I'm relieved when she returns to take out the needles. She has me hold a glass vial in each hand as she checks my tongue. Delicately, she implies that I may have a drinking problem. When I tell her that I only drink occasionally, she becomes solemn, looking me in the eye as she says, "Listen to me. Sugar is not your friend."

#### IV

At Garfield Park there's a huge Star Wars-themed birthday party taking place. Forty or fifty middle-school-aged boys wielding inflatable lightsabers swarm the playground, terrorizing parents and younger children, a totally uncontrollable force.

Hanah and I take refuge in the sand pit. A man with a beard strikes up a conversation with me as our kids play together. He asks if I'm a musician and I say not really, but that my parents are. A while later he says, "Man, there's nothing more psychedelic than having a kid." I laugh knowingly and agree without thinking. I know he doesn't mean much aside from a kind of mutual agreement that, despite the appearance that he and I are just two ordinary dads at the park, we have both in fact done LSD, which makes us not only more interesting as people, but also better equipped to appreciate the true depth and meaning of bringing a child into the world. But the more I consider it, the more it seems that being a parent is close to the exact opposite of psychedelic. If acid cuts you loose from the minutiae of the daily routine, zooming out to form a comic parody of living, being a parent brings those minutiae into sharp, unyielding focus. It forces you to become a crafts-person even though you might have preferred to approach

life as a kind of dilettante conceptual artist, running the clock on this and that activity, reframing the parameters around your own habits. Like psychedelics, parenting can also be funny, but in a convulsive way, like a joke, never satirical. This nearsightedness in parents, I think, must be what makes Mom and Dad two of the most parodied characters of all time. To make fun of one's parents may be the very reason comedy exists at all.

The bearded man also studied art. He got a BFA on the East Coast in the 1990s. He used to play music and was in a few bands, but he doesn't play so much anymore. He tells me that he and his partner own an organic bakery in Echo Park that specializes in custom cakes decorated in the style of 1960s psychedelia. He shows me his bakery's Instagram page. The cakes are incredibly vibrant and detailed, with spiraling rainbows drawn in icing and Grateful Dead marching teddy bears cut out of colored fondant. *The Dark Side of the Moon* prism raw vegan cheesecake. Raspberry vanilla swirl yin-yang sandwich cookies. Devotional cold brew ice cream pops. Custom tarot card blackberry vanilla cakes. Sun and moon "celestial kiss" cupcakes infused with strawberry and rose. Vernal equinox lemon lavender layer cake with beansprout detail. Low-glycemic Led Zeppelin brownies. Pineapple guava peace sign.

Hanah becomes enamored with the bearded man's son, who is about two years older than her. She moves quickly around the sandbox, collecting fallen sticks and dried seed pods in a plastic bucket, which she then presents to the boy. He accepts the offering half-heartedly and then asks his dad if they can go home. As they pack up to leave he tells me that I should come by his shop sometime. I reply that my acupuncturist just told me I need to cut down on sugar.



Ren Ebel, *Couple with Puppet*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

“Well, what kinds of sweets are your go-to?” he asks, not wanting to end on a sour note. “What’s your drug of choice?”

I tell him that I eat whatever I can get my hands on. Especially when I’m stressed out. Any kind of sugary junk. I’m not too proud to completely debase myself and eat the lowest-quality chocolate, stale baked goods, et cetera.

“We make most of our stuff with date sugar, rather than real sugar. It’s a lot better for your liver.”

I tell him thanks, but I think I have to go cold turkey, not sure at this point why I’m so set on disappointing him. I quickly add that I think the cakes are really gorgeous.

As his child pulls him away by the arm toward the parking lot and out of view, he turns and practically yells back: “We also sell gifts. Weavings, oils, palo santo, infinity scarves, hand-beaded energy bracelets made from jasper and sea sediment...”

## V

When Laida gets home, we switch with Hanah and I go for a walk alone just as the rain begins to fall lightly. Since I’m without the stroller, I decide to go up Figueroa and climb the stairs with the tai-chi mural. When I reach the top, I find myself facing a large flat-screen TV through the window of a lime-green stucco house. The image on the screen is of a rainforest somewhere—the footage shot from the ground, aiming straight up toward the canopy. A woman and her young son sit motionless on a couch facing the screen. The image of the rainforest remains unchanging for what feels like a full minute. It appears to be a screen saver, lending mystery to the fact of the woman and the boy.

I press on. The road narrows and winds down a canyon to a part of the neighborhood I’ve never seen before. The further down I go, the more lavish and overgrown the homes become. Two-story Victorians caked in moss, where the rich hide their wealth and keep their families to themselves.



R. Ebel, *Couple with Skeleton*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist

I come to a bend in the road, and the rain comes on strong. A bulldog barks at me from behind a fence so thick with ivy that I can only make out one black marble eye. Above me, a large blue and white hacienda sits atop a hilly front yard cut with crisscrossing walkways. The yard is decorated with objects that look so poignant and perfectly worn, they seem like a set design for a soap opera. Two stacked

hay bales with a hand-painted target, stuck by three wooden arrows (two misses and bullseye). On the driveway, smeared yellow chalk squares for hopscotch, and an old doll made gray by rainwater.

I decide to turn around and hike back up the road. The rain eases up by the time I reach the narrow embankment near the top. I had missed the view on my way down. It looks out onto a collage of rooftops and ventilators broken up everywhere by tree branches and patches of wet leaves. Triads of cypress trees stick out here and there like massive pitchforks. Way down at the bottom, in the distance I can see my bank. I see the ATM machines that I use two or three times a week to withdraw more borrowed cash for day care, or the nanny, or the weekend babysitter, or to deposit my meager teaching assistant checks, which will barely cover my end of the month's rent. The Wells Fargo on the corner of La Loma and Colorado, which governs so much of my practical and emotional life, seen here in miniature, swallowed up by a pleasant green hellscape.